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A new reason for a CIA charter

CIA chief Stansfield Turner didn't mean to do so, but he recently provided a good argument for giving Congress better control of his agency. In an appearance before the Senate Intelligence Committee, Turner generally supported a bill to establish a legislative charter for his agency, but spoke against a provision that would require the CIA to give Congress confidential notice of risky covert activities abroad. Then, almost off-handedly, he disclosed that he has not always notified Congress of such activities, despite his promise to do so.

The promise was made during Turner's confirmation hearings before the same committee in 1977. He said then that he would give Congress confidential notice of covert actions except on "an extremely rare occasion" when "something might come up in the middle of the night." That narrow exception, his recent testimony makes clear, has been unilater-

ally widened. How far is not clear; Turner didn't say.

What is clear, however, is that Americans cannot rely on private promises to give their elected representatives a chance to oversee the CIA and to guard against abuses of its power. The nation needs a good intelligence-gathering agency, and some secrecy is necessary to achieve that end. But the nation does not need an agency that secretly, on its own, undertakes foreign programs that can have significant foreign-policy implications. Unelected officials, even intelligence agents, must be accountable to elected officials who, in turn, are accountable to the public. Turner's testimony underscored not the point he intended to make, but the opposite: that the effective way to impose such accountability on the CIA is through legislation.